carried out repeatedly in order to improve one’s communication skills.) The idea of re-creating controversial episodes adds color to the movie, but not credibility: we still have to rely on Rathbun’s biased testimony.

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The last decade has been a rough one for the Church of Scientology. Since 2008, a number of high-ranking defectors have come forward to condemn the Church’s current leadership. There is a growing list of books by ex-members that detail a shocking array of alleged abuses within the Church. Withering exposés of Scientology have appeared in the St. Petersburg Times and on CNN’s Anderson Cooper 360, while the Church’s innermost secrets were mercilessly ridiculed in a 2005 episode of South Park. More recently, Scientology has been the focus of three major books: my own academic work, The Church of Scientology (2011), and two journalistic accounts, Janet Reitman’s Inside Scientology (2011), and Lawrence Wright’s Going Clear (2013). The last of these served as the basis for this award-winning—and quite critical—documentary film produced by HBO in 2015.

Documentaries about Scientology are hardly a new genre. There has been a steady stream of films and special news episodes about the Church since the early British documentary, The Shrinking World of L. Ron Hubbard in 1968, and continuing up through recent exposés such as CNN’s series on the Church in 2010. Yet Going Clear is arguably the best of the genre in terms of its directing, production, and overall visceral impact. Written and directed by respected filmmaker Alex Gibney (Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room, 2005; We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks, 2015), Going Clear is in many ways a powerful film, with outstanding cinematography, gripping personal narratives, and rich historical detail. The narrative recounts the experiences of a number of prominent ex-Scientologists: writer and filmmaker Paul Haggis, actor Jason Beghe, public relations consultant Spanky Taylor, former Sea Org member Hana Eltringham Whitfield, former high-ranking Scientology executives Mike Rinder, Tom De Vocht, and Marty Rathbun, and two other ex-members of the Church, Sara Goldberg and Steve “Sarge” Pfauth. These interviews are interspersed with comments from journalists such as Lawrence Wright and Tony Ortega, along with historical footage of the usual suspects in the Scientology celebrity lineup such as John Travolta and Tom Cruise. The overall effect of all of this is quite damning for Scientology, but often problematic in terms of its methodology, as I will explain below.
As a long-time Scientology observer myself, one thing I very much appreciated was the use of original archival material, such as early interviews with Hubbard and particularly the fascinating narrative of his second wife, Sara Northrup (who was with Hubbard during the birth of both Dianetics and Scientology in the early 1950s). The interviews with ex-members vividly bring to life many of the stories we have all heard about Scientology: the allure of Scientology during the 1960s and 1970s, Hubbard’s volatile character, the Church’s vindictive and intensely litigious attitude toward critics, and its long war with the Internal Revenue Service, which finally resulted in Scientology being recognized as a tax-exempt religion in the United States, though not in many other countries.

Indeed, perhaps the most valuable point the film makes is the key question (also central to my own book) of what exactly a religion is. Who gets to make that determination? And what is at stake in calling something a religion? As Wright put it in his interview in the film: “How do you define a religion? It’s not so easy. Why is one body of thinking a religion and another body not? The only organization entitled to make those distinctions is the IRS. It’s an agency very poorly equipped to do that. They’re mainly accountants and lawyers, they’re not theologians. But it’s the only opinion that matters.”

While Going Clear is a fine film in many ways, it also suffers from a number of problems, several of them related to Wright’s book on which it is based. Like Wright’s book, the film focuses heavily on the role of celebrities and Hollywood elites in the Church, but it does not give us a very clear picture at all of the role of ordinary, non-celebrity members. We can see why Travolta and Beghe found Scientology’s auditing courses compelling—the promise of unleashing creative ability, the possibility of networking with other stars—but we are less able to see why a roof contractor in Ohio or a small businessman in Michigan would seek out this particular religious option. After all, the large majority of Scientologists are not in fact celebrities and never have been, despite the constant media attention.

A second, related problem is a methodological one. Like the book Going Clear, the film relies more or less entirely on the accounts of ex-Scientologists and journalists who are almost unanimously critical of the Church. Apart from archival footage, there are no interviews with current Scientologists and also no interviews with scholars who have worked extensively on Scientology, such James R. Lewis, Stephen Kent, J. Gordon Melton, Susan Raine, and many others. The result is that the impression one gets of Scientology is not just overwhelmingly negative but often lacking in nuance or depth. Surely this is in part a result of the condensed time-frame of documentary film and the need to create a tight, punchy, two-hour narrative. But both Hubbard and the Church are portrayed in fairly simplistic, almost cartoonish terms: the
former is described as a highly imaginative but paranoid and spiteful narcissist while the latter is described as an abusive money-making scheme constructed to feed the ego of the former.

Here, the film makes a significant departure from Wright’s book. In many ways, Wright really attempted to portray Hubbard in a sympathetic light (sometimes almost stretching credulity) by describing him as a brilliant yet flawed and complex individual. At one point, in an act of remarkable generosity, Wright even compared Hubbard’s work to that of other great modern philosophers: “It would be better understood as a philosophy of human nature; seen in that light, Hubbard’s thought could be compared with that of other moral philosophies, such as Immanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard, although no one has ever approached the sweep of Hubbard’s work.” This sympathy toward Hubbard and his work, however inflated in Wright’s book, is largely lost in the film. In Gibney’s documentary, we see an almost entirely unfavorable portrait of the man. While briefly acknowledging Hubbard’s moments of charm and inventiveness, the film describes him more often as a liar, a con-man, and a tyrant, who was not only violent, cruel, and suspicious, but also probably mentally ill. Ultimately, through interviews with several damaged ex-Scientologists, it suggests that following Scientology’s Bridge to Total Freedom will lead to that same state of instability, fear, and self-destruction.

Wright states clearly in his interview in the film that he does not want to create another exposé, but instead simply wants to grasp Scientology: “to understand what people get out of it, why are they going to it in the first place.” Unfortunately, that is precisely where the film falls short. Rather than give us a deeply nuanced account of ordinary people who are genuinely drawn to the Church—including the many thousands who remain in the Church to this day—the film spends most of its time retelling the tales of Scientology’s most infamous misdeeds and its founder’s most bizarre personality traits.

In the end, Going Clear does very well what most critics now expect a Scientology documentary to do: it paints a vivid and disturbing picture of a greed-driven cult founded by a narcissistic megalomaniac that has seduced and destroyed the lives of otherwise good people. What the film does not do is portray the lives of average, non-celebrity Scientologists, who either grow up in the Church as children or who participate in it out of genuine personal or spiritual interest. In many ways, this non-Hollywood side of the story is the more interesting one, and it is the story that still remains to be told. I very much hope that journalists as skilled as Wright and filmmakers as talented as Gibney will one day choose to make such a film.

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